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PP RUEHBI RUEHCI RUEHHM RUEHJO  
DE RUEHKA #1740/01 0890851  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
P 300851Z MAR 06  
FM AMEMBASSY DHAKA  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 6513  
INFO RUCNCLC/CHILD LABOR COLLECTIVE  
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 1050  
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 8988  
RUEHLM/AMEMBASSY COLOMBO 7373  
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 0238  
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 1416  
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU 8463  
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 1028  
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL CALCUTTA  
RUEHHK/AMCONSUL HONG KONG 0495  
RUEHIN/AIT TAIPEI 0064  
RUEHC/DEPT OF LABOR WASHDC

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 001740

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE  
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [ELAB](#) [ETRD](#) [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [BG](#)

SUBJECT: EYEWITNESSES PLACE KTS FACTORY FIRE DEATHS AT OVER  
300

REF: DHAKA 01528

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: Media reported that a fire on February 23 at the Chittagong KTS Textile factory killed 61 people and injured over a hundred. Laboff spoke to KTS factory workers who described the fire which destroyed the factory, left hundreds of workers searching for work, others seeking unpaid wages, and, in the worse cases, searching for missing relatives. Eyewitnesses and union organizers placed the death toll at over 300. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) On March 16, with the assistance of a local labor NGO, the Bangladesh Independent Garment Union Federation (BIGUF), laboff spoke to 30 workers from the KTS factory at BIGUF's Chittagong offices. Media reported that there were 1,100 workers in the factory, but BIGUF's representative told laboff that he estimated only 600 workers were present. The mostly women workers were in their early 20's or teens. Two teenagers told laboff they were 11 and 12 years old. Asked what work they do at the factory, they said they were inspectors, which is typical work for younger, entry level workers.

¶3. (SBU) One young woman, who said she was 16, described the outbreak of the fire. After their 6 PM break time, many of the workers were coming down from the roof, a popular break area in the factory, and a mandatory break area for the youngest workers, she said. Many workers smelled smoke, and told their supervisors, who responded by ordering the gatekeepers to lock perimeter gates that led the street, she said. Asked why the owner did this, she said it was normal for "the owner to lock the gates to prevent theft." Asked if this would impede the fire department from entering and fighting the fire, she said that three months earlier, another fire had broken out and management and workers stopped the fire then, and management thought "they could put out the fire as in the past."

¶4. (SBU) Soon, she said, it was obvious to the production supervisors that the fire was "too big" and uncontrollable, so the supervisor broke some windows to permit workers on her floor to jump to the ground below. She said she was on the upper level of the four-floor building, and after jumping was

caught by people on the ground below. She and several other workers showed the burns on their hands and feet, and complained of body aches from jumping. They told laboff about other workers with more serious burns and injuries.

15. (SBU) Another worker told laboff that at around 10 PM, she went to the Chittagong Medical Hospital to search for her missing brother, and saw at least 25 dead or dying people in the hallways. She said that members of the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) started to enter the hospital, and told her to come back at 9 AM in the morning when Prime Minister Zia was expected to arrive to survey the factory damage. Wanting to find her brother, she told the RAB officers that she would come back in the morning but instead went to another part of the hospital where she saw bodies of people "stacked higher than my head." She told laboff that she counted more than 300 bodies but could not "identify anyone as all of their clothes had been burnt off." She is still missing her brother, she said. BIGUF's local representative told laboff he has documented 350 deaths related to the fire, and showed laboff grisly photos of burnt bodies.

16. (SBU) According to the workers, the factory was about only a year and half old, Bangladeshi owned and managed, but undergoing expansion. They said that a gas welding machine was broken and caused the previous fire, and assumed the broken machine caused this one as well. Sources reported that the police have arrested a company accountant and another factory supervisor, but the owner remains at large. BIGUF's representative told laboff that he knows of 55 workers who are seriously injured and still in the hospital as of mid-March. Media placed the latest death toll at 84 dead.

17. (SBU) The workers told laboff that the fire, which occurred near the end of the month, meant that they had not received their month's wages, and don't know whom to contact.

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They said that the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturer and Exporter Association (BGMEA) paid a few dozen workers 3,700 taka or 52 USD, but "we have not been paid." (Note: An average highly proficient garment worker gets 2,200 to 4,000 taka a month or 31 to 57 USD. End Note.) The BIGUF representative said they are assisting workers to get their wages and severance pay, and added that the families of the dead are supposed to receive 100,000 taka or 1,400 USD but none have been paid this. He said that in order to receive this money, the family must provide a death certificate. However, none of the families have the 1,000 taka needed to pay for the certificate.  
CHAMMAS